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ABSTRACT

While there are acknowledged physical, psychological, and social benefits to be derived from maintaining sexual activity in old age, the negative cultural attitudes displayed by younger members of society as well as by their own peers constitute a barrier to the achievement of a satisfactory sex life for the elderly. A study was undertaken to examine the attitudes of working class adults (N=43) and of high school seniors (N=55) toward aging and sexuality. All subjects were Puerto Ricans residing in New Jersey. Subjects completed a questionnaire on social and sexual activity, work-related issues, physical abilities and illness, and cognitive functioning in which they approximated the percentage of older men and older women they felt exhibited the behavior in question. The results indicated that attitudes toward the process of aging and sexuality seemed to depend on the gender of the older person as well as on the specific event or behavior involved. In addition, the gender and age of the subjects influenced the results. There were different attitudes toward sexuality in older men compared to older women; and there were significant differences in attitudes toward sexual activity and romantic relationships, with sex seen by all groups as more important for men than for women. (NRB)

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Aging and Sexuality: perceptions of a Puerto Rican sample

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CG 018383

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(1) Aging and sexuality: perceptions of a Puerto Rican sample.

(2) Social

Attitudes

Cross-cultural research

(3) Problem

In our youth oriented society the concept of older people engaging in sexual activity is often a source of humor, ridicule, or embarrassment. White and Catania (1982) noted that the negative perceptions about sex in the aging population reflect "fear, stereotypic thinking and ignorance." Some older people not only hope for an end to sexual relationships but also assume that with age, one loses interest (Cameron, 1970; Golde and Kogan, 1959). Several studies, however, indicate that the older person who is sexually active may be considered abnormal by his peers (Ward, 1977; LaTorre and Kear, 1977). Although many of the aged have both the capability and the interest in remaining sexually active, they do not always have the opportunities (Masters and Johnson, 1970; Verwoerdt, Pfeiffer and Wang, 1969; Newman and Nichols, 1960). While there are acknowledged physical, psychological and social benefits to be derived from maintaining sexual activity in old age, the negative cultural attitudes displayed by younger members of the society as well as by their own peers constitute a barrier to the achievement of a satisfactory sex life for the elderly. Since adolescents are not educated to understand life-span sexuality, they find it difficult to accept the idea of sexual behavior in the aged. According to White and Catania, "The social proscription against being sexually active and old is most insidious" (1982:122). Sexual identity is considered an integral part of the

personality and the loss of that identity, just as the loss of work identity, affects self-esteem (Kuypers and Bengtson, 1973). The general social belief that sexuality is the exclusive domain of the young and attractive has relegated many older men and women to premature impotence, frustration, self-depreciation and loneliness. Lack of information about realistic changes in physiological functioning combined with lowered self-esteem and negative public opinion can result in the degeneration of sexual activity that feeds into the vicious cycle lowering confidence even more.

Sexuality in the aged is often opposed by adult children who see these urges for intimacy in their parents as disgraceful or as signs of regression to childhood. This negative attitude holds more strongly for the mother than the father and is generalized to all elderly females. Since older people are usually identified with one's parents, serious discussion about the sexual behavior of the elderly tends to make people uncomfortable (Pfeiffer, 1975; Sviland, 1981). However, Thomas (1982) suggests that there is a growing trend among some gerontologists to prescribe sexual activity as if it was an "essential vitamin." He contends that there may now be a tendency to overemphasize the benefits of regular sexual activity or the disadvantages of sexual deprivation. It is possible that knowledge of this trend has filtered down to the general public and may perhaps influence their attitudes toward aging and sexuality.

There have been complaints in the literature concerning the widespread use of college students as subjects and the use of surveys that do not distinguish between the sexes in terms of aging patterns (Costello and Meocham, 1981). To avoid these problems we chose a working class Puerto Rican sample of adults and high school seniors and designed our

instrument to distinguish between "older men" and "older women." Furthermore, Ludeman (1981) noted that many studies focus on genital sex ignoring social relationships. In response to that criticism we included items on social activities as well.

Based on our search of the literature and on discussions with colleagues in the field, we predicted that, in general:

1. Younger subjects would be more negative in their perceptions than the older subjects.
2. Male and female subjects would differ in opinion regarding "older men" and "older women." The direction of those differences would depend on the issue.
3. The data would indicate that a "double standard" of aging does exist.

(4) Subjects

The sample consisted of 98 Puerto Rican subjects (24 working adult males, 19 working adult females, 18 high school senior males and 37 high school senior females). Each subject was interviewed individually in the language of choice (English or Spanish). The study was conducted in a suburban area of Northwest New Jersey.

(5) Procedure

A questionnaire focusing on social and sexual activity, work related issues, physical abilities and illness and cognitive functioning was developed. Subjects in many previous studies have either been asked simply to "agree" or "disagree" with a series of statements concerning the aged (Arnhoff, Leon and Lorge, 1960) or to indicate whether a state is "true" or "false" (Palmore, 1980). In an attempt to generate data

data with more variability, subjects were requested to approximate the percentage of "older men" and "older women" (from 0-100%) that they felt exhibited the behavior in question.

An analysis of variance was performed on the responses to each statement. The independent variables were age and sex of subject and sex of stimulus persons ("older men" versus "older women"). The dependent measure was the percentage reported for each statement.

(6) Results

As suggested by Costello and Meacham (1981), our findings about attitudes toward the process of aging and sexuality do seem to depend on the sex of the older person as well as on the specific event or type of behavior involved. In addition, it was clear that the sex and the age of the subjects also influenced the results (See Table 1).

Insert Table 1 about here.

While there was agreement on several issues, there was a clear generation gap in perception concerning the percentage of older men and women who "should be interested in sex." There were also sex differences in attitude especially between the men and women in the adult sample. In terms of differential attitudes toward sexuality in "older men" versus "older women"; there were significant differences in terms of sexual activity as opposed to romantic relationships, sex being seen as more important for the male than for the female by all groups.

All subject groups perceived that more than half of the elderly could or should be engaged in social and/or sexual behavior, albeit mainly restricted to their own age group.

(7) Implications and conclusions

These results can best be understood when we compare our findings on sexuality with attitudes to levels of physical and cognitive functioning in the elderly, with attitudes toward sexuality in other age groups and with attitudes toward all types of functioning in samples from other cultural groups, a process that is now in progress.

In general, we conclude that expressed attitudes toward sexual activity in this sample were not as negative as we had anticipated; that generational differences do exist, the younger people being more critical than the adult subjects and finally that there were "real" sex differences in outlook between the subjects, especially the adults, and that people do, indeed, see aging as having a different impact on men than women.

Table 1. Summary of responses of subject groups to "older men" and "older women"

Questions	Ss	Sex: Older Men: Adult Males	Older Men: Adult Females	Older Men: H.S. Males	Older Men: H.S. Females	Older Women: Adult Males	Older Women: Adult Females	Older Women: H.S. Males	Older Women: H.S. Females
What percentage of older men/women									
1. are capable of feeling romantic love?		63.00	72.25	58.75	65.50	55.50	71.00	64.75	60.75
2. should go out on dates?		69.50	75.00	57.25	60.25	64.25	73.85	60.25	60.25
3. should engage in social activities only with other older people?		58.25	31.50	56.00	60.25	60.50	30.25	61.75	62.25
4. sit and daydream?		56.50	51.50	61.75	58.00	62.00	54.25	63.25	60.75
5. like to give advice to others?		66.25	76.25	57.25	59.50	65.25	77.75	58.75	62.75
6. complain about the younger generation?		57.50	69.75	57.25	60.75	65.25	72.25	61.75	62.25
7. talk about the good old days?		49.00	47.25	56.00	60.75	55.50	35.50	60.25	62.75
8. expect others to take care of them?		51.00	46.00	66.25	64.75	54.25	43.50	61.75	62.75
9. should live only with others their own age?		56.50	36.75	58.75	62.25	59.75	34.25	57.25	58.50
10. need more love and reassurance than others?		63.00	79.00	63.25	61.25	68.50	72.25	63.25	59.50
11. look and dress young?		57.50	38.25	58.75	58.00	55.50	54.00	57.25	59.50
12. should be interested in sex?		72.75	69.75	57.25	56.75	65.25	65.75	60.25	61.50
13. have sexual desires?		63.00	61.00	66.25	66.25	58.75	61.00	58.75	60.75
14. are physically capable of sexual behavior?		62.00	55.25	57.25	57.50	56.50	63.25	61.75	62.25
15. should engage in sexual behavior?		73.00	60.50	64.75	50.75	65.25	60.50	61.75	66.25

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